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Vermin, Visualisation, and Animal Geography: Graphic Adaptations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

By David Herman

Although Stanley Corngold has memorably dubbed Franz Kafka's 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* [*Die Verwandlung*] 'the commentator's despair,'¹ one thing about Kafka's text – or at least its publishing history – remains relatively certain. Kafka would have in all likelihood disapproved of graphic adaptations of his narrative, given his resistance to any attempt to visualise Gregor Samsa's transformation into an *ungeheuren Ungeziefer*, a monstrous vermin. Dean Swinford notes that when Kurt Wolff, the publisher of the first edition of Kafka's text, told Kafka that he had commissioned the artist Ottomar Starke to create an illustration for the frontispiece, Kafka replied: 'It occurred to me that ... [the artist] might want to draw the insect itself. Please, not that – anything but that! ... The insect cannot be drawn here. It cannot even be shown in the distance.'² Why would Kafka seek to impose this interdiction on any visual rendering of his verminous character? And how do adaptations of the text that do include images as well as words, such as the three graphic adaptations to be discussed here,³ bear on the issues that may have informed Kafka's resistance to visualisation?

In an analysis of the role of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis*, Corngold broaches ideas that may help explain Kafka's resistance to illustrations or visualisations of his protagonist. Corngold argues that Gregor's status as vermin undercuts interpretations of the text that read Gregor as a metaphor come alive – for example, a metaphor for alienated labour or for some version of the Freudian Id.⁴ A metaphor, Corngold suggests, requires some definite entity for its vehicle,

so that by means of this entity, which has recognizable characteristics, something else – often something higher, something that cannot be directly pictured – can be grasped by 'carrying over'

to it some properties of this more definite entity; this way the more elusive, the higher entity can be perceptually spelled out and, indeed, made to appear in boldface.⁵

Vermin are unsuitable candidates for metaphoric transference of this sort, or what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson would characterise as the projection of a source domain (here the domain of pests or vermin) onto a target domain (here the domain associated with Gregor's life history, family context, and post-metamorphosis experiences).⁶ As Corngold puts it, 'the concept of a vermin is not a natural thing, it has no predictable visual identity, it is not literally a thing: "vermin" is a shifting social construction.'⁷ Corngold's account harmonises with Fissell's suggestion that the category of vermin, encompassing all those 'animals whom it is largely acceptable to kill,' has included different kinds of animals at different times – such that in 17th-century England, for example, 'birds and animals whom we now consider rare or beautiful – kingfishers, herons, osprey and otters – were labelled vermin, and methods were developed to kill them.'⁸ The malleability or amorphousness of the category of vermin, besides limiting Gregor's metaphoric potential, also impinges on issues of visualisation. Insofar as the category of vermin corresponds to a shifting assemblage of disfavoured species – an assemblage that may vary across cultures and also different phases of a given culture – to use the member of any one species as a stand-in for the whole category would be to trade polysemy for particularity, a matrix of ideas and attitudes for a single value within that matrix.⁹

Indeed, research by Fissell, Nicholas Holm, Colin Jerolmack, and others suggests how the idea of vermin plays, in the context of human-nonhuman relationships, a role analogous to what in the context of linguistic communication Roman Jakobson called 'shifters'.¹⁰ Shifters, which modern-day language theorists discuss under the heading of deictic or indexical terms, include expressions such as *I*, *here*, and *now*; the meaning of these expressions depends on who is uttering them and in what discourse context. Analogously, creatures cast as vermin index shifting conceptions of the boundary between human and nonhuman beings, and also different ideas about which nonhuman agents constitute a threat or at least nuisance to their human counterparts.¹¹ The essential mutability of the category of vermin derives from the changing circumstances in which various species come to be seen as evading or resisting human control and thereby acquire the status of problem animals, animals which must be killed, expunged from

the human scene.

In other words, animals become a problem – as the presence of Gregor in the Samsas' apartment suggests – when they infiltrate spaces that are understood to be reserved for and controlled by humans. As the configuration, density, and scope of these spaces change, so too do membership criteria for the category of vermin. Thus, in developing his account of how pigeons came to be viewed as 'rats with wings' in North American cities, Jerolmack draws on work by Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert to explore how, in any culture, the imaginative geography of animals imposes expectations concerning the spatial distribution of species.¹² As Jerolmack puts it, 'animals that disgust us, such as rats, are often associated with the most undesirable urban interstices such as sewers'; by transgressing the boundary between human-dominated and 'natural' spaces, such pests stir up feelings of disgust 'by entering sidewalks and homes.'¹³ The horrified reaction of the chief clerk from the bank when Gregor makes his initial appearance in his verminous state, his mother's trepidation about entering Gregor's room, his father's and sister's angry disavowal of kinship with Gregor when the three lodgers refuse to pay rent because of Gregor's presence in the apartment – all of these details from *The Metamorphosis* suggest how aversive reactions called up by (and constitutive of) vermin are anchored in violations of spatial boundaries, incursions of the nonhuman into ostensibly human territories. In this sense vermin can be defined as species entering spaces where they are not supposed to be, with norms based on hierarchical understandings of species difference translating into a normative model of animal geography.¹⁴ Hence even as Kafka's text remains strategically vague about Gregor's monstrous morphology, it provides precise details about the internal organisation of the Samsas' apartment, as well as the contents and layout of Gregor's room. Kafka thereby suggests that it is the shocking incongruity between space and species, and not a clearly demarcated range of species characteristics, that underlies the aversion, distancing, and disavowal¹⁵ that are emotional and practical correlates of categorising a being as vermin.

Arguably then, Kafka de-essentialises Gregor's species identity in order to highlight the particular salience of space in the construction of animal geographies, situating the concept of vermin in a larger process of territorialisation in which humans attempt to assert biotic dominance and control. To this extent, assigning to Gregor a definite, identifying morphology –

for example, through visualisation of the protagonist as a dung beetle, cockroach, or other insect species – runs counter to Kafka's purposes in *The Metamorphosis*. The text is concerned less with any specific vermin than with the effects (on humans as well as nonhumans) of a creature's inclusion in the category of vermin, and with the triggering conditions that lead to such acts of categorisation.¹⁶ If visualisation cuts against the grain of Kafka's text in this way, however, it also supports Kafka's broader project of reassessing his culture's indigenous, normative animal geography. All three of the graphic adaptations to which I now turn are constrained by the medium of comics to assign to Gregor a distinctive species identity, and they thus abrogate one of Kafka's own procedural rules in the story; yet at the same time these narratives exploit the visualising affordances of the medium to model an alternative animal geography. With individual scenes figuring human characters and the member of a disfavoured species as co-inhabitants of the same physical spaces, the adaptations momentarily arrest Kafka's overarching narrative sequence, which tells the story of the violent expulsion of Gregor from human territories. Such medium-enabled moments of arrest or stasis suggest an alternative, biocentric¹⁷ spatial logic, in which humans and their verminous others share a common space haunted by residual (or could it be future?) kinship relations.

Two moments from *The Metamorphosis* – or rather, the way these moments are figured through scenes included in the graphic adaptations – demonstrate how the medium of comics scaffolds Kafka's project of reframing animal geography in biocentric rather than anthropocentric terms. One moment occurs in the second section of the story, in which Grete enlists her mother's help to clear out the furniture from his bedroom, ostensibly for the purpose of giving Gregor more freedom of movement, but in a way that Gregor interprets as contributing to the further attenuation of his link to his human past, and also his further alienation from human territories. The second moment occurs when Gregor, severely weakened by the wound from the apple that (having been hurled at him by his father) is now lodged in his back, listens to Grete's violin playing and fantasises about supporting her musical studies – with the result that 'his sister would be so touched that she would burst into tears, and Gregor would then raise himself to her shoulder and kiss her on the neck'.¹⁸ Figures 1, 2, and 3 present Mairowitz & Crumb's, Kuper's, and Corbeyran & Horne's representations of the scene in Gregor's bedroom; figures 4 and 5 represent, in Kuper's and Corbeyran & Horne's texts, Gregor's fantasy about supporting and

being reunited with his sister. (Mairowitz & Crumb do not include this second scene in their condensed adaptation/explication of Kafka's text.)

Both figures 1 and 2 assign Gregor the morphology of a dung beetle, though they use contrasting drawing styles and different ways of integrating the verbal and visual tracks; figure 3 selects for Gregor the species identity of a cockroach, '*un enorme cafard*'.¹⁹ On the one hand, these visualisations delimit interpretive possibilities by indicating a token vermin rather than the general type of verminousness. On the other hand, however, by staging scenes in which a verminous creature that is roughly the size of a dog co-inhabits the most intimate spaces of the home, all three adaptations open up momentary possibilities for imagining animal geography otherwise. These images envision as companion animals – in an extended sense – members of species currently excluded from what might be called the transhuman family, which in its current form encompasses only the select few nonhuman kinds treated as pets. Kuper, in figure 2, has chosen to draw Gregor as a dung beetle with a human face, whereas the other adaptations effect a more thoroughgoing transfer of Gregor from the domain of the human to that of the nonhuman. In all three instances, by affording a glimpse of Gregor's continued participation in family affairs despite his more or less radically transformed appearance, these visualisations call into question the partitioning of human and nonhuman spaces, in a manner consonant with Kafka's rethinking of the value hierarchies linked to recognised differences among forms of life. The images figure an alternative animal geography, in which Gregor's presence challenges the norms and expectations that exclude him from the human scene.²⁰

Likewise, figures 4 and 5 suggest how the adaptations' use of images can further potentiate the shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric animal geography. Figure 4, from Kuper's adaptation, portrays a diminished and incapacitated Gregor fantasising about his reunion with Grete. In the verbal track Kuper uses thought-balloons to present the hypothetical scenario of cross-species connection, even as the visual track highlights the difficulty of actually crossing the species boundary, here literalised as a threshold that Gregor inches toward in his weakened state. The final panel, however, shows Gregor to be within reach of the wished-for reunion, his fore-leg nearly touching what appears to be Grete's foot. For their part, Corbeyran & Horne in figure 5 visualise the imagined scenario itself; but like Kuper they juxtapose the fantasised embrace

against Gregor's actual situation. On this page the size, placement, and striking anomalousness of the roach-human reunion underscore the disparity between the forms of relatedness made possible by biocentric affiliation, on the one hand, and the strict spatial partitioning entailed by anthropocentric distancing and disavowal, on the other hand. The spatial logic of this scene again offsets the chrono-logic of Kafka's plot, which moves inexorably toward the consequences of a model based on the dichotomous and hierarchical separation of humans and vermin – a model defining the verminous not just as non- but as anti-human. But rather than critiquing this model by simply reversing the polarity of the value system that underlies it, in the manner of Jonathan Swift's treatment of humans as yahoos in the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*, figure 5, along with the other images I have discussed, uses visualisation to reinforce and extend Kafka's project of dismantling the value system itself. The scene suggests how an anthropocentric animal geography, in which only a select few companion animals are allowed to co-inhabit human spaces, might be countered with an alternative, biocentric geography informed by the concept of an extended transhuman family.

This alternative animal geography, which Mairowitz & Crumb, Kuper, and Corbeyran & Horne use the medium of comics to model in multiple ways, opens the centre of human territories, the place called home, to a diversity of species – and not just to the favored few admitted into the family circle as, in effect, honorary *homo sapiens*. In its sequential unfolding Kafka's narrative enacts the imperatives of a closed kinship system based on the denial or severe curtailment of transspecies affiliations and, concomitantly, a strict demarcation of human versus nonhuman places.²¹ Exploiting the visual resources of the comics medium, Kafka's adapters display cross-sections of this system and show, with a microgeographic precision that extends to the level of furniture arrangements and postural orientations within domestic spaces, the system's unsustainability at any given moment for the human as well as nonhuman animals who fall within its purview. Kafka's text asks, 'Who is harmed more by the abjection of beings deemed unworthy of admission into territories identified as human: those who are barred from these places, and die from the resulting deprivations, or those who police the borders of such territories and define themselves in opposition to what lies on the other side?' The graphic adaptations of *The Metamorphosis* reinfect this question in a manner that, if anything, amplifies its unsettling effects. By using the visual track to figure human-vermin co-placement as at least a momentary

possibility within a dominant logic of separation and exclusion, and by thus opening a path to new forms of transspecies affiliation and hence new spatial regimes, the adaptations provide impetus for readers to ask: 'In what ways is my home – and the family I belong to – something other than I had always assumed?'

¹ Stanley Corngold, *The Commentator's Despair*, Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1973.

² Quoted by Dean Swinford, 'The Portrait of an Armor-Plated Sign: Reimagining Samsa's Exoskeleton' in Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri (eds.) *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, pp. 211-36; here, p. 217.

³ The three adaptations are Éric Corbeyran & Richard Horne, *La Métamorphose de Franz Kafka*, Paris: Delcourt, 2009; Peter Kuper, *Metamorphosis*, New York, Broadway Books, 2004; and the adaptation (and explication) of *The Metamorphosis* contained in David Zane Mairowitz & Robert Crumb, *Introducing Kafka*, Cambridge, MA: Totem Books, 1994, pp. 39-56.

⁴ For discussion of these and other ways of reading Kafka's story, see Swinford, 'The Portrait of an Armor-Plated Sign,' pp. 214-18.

⁵ Stanley Corngold, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Vermin,' *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire* 21, 2004, pp. 59-85; here p. 61.

⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

⁷ Corngold, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Vermin,' p. 60.

⁸ Mary Fissell, 'Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England,' *History Workshop Journal* 47, 1999, pp. 1-29; here, p. 1.

⁹ The fuzziness of the category of vermin may be behind Kafka's creation of a composite morphology for Gregor, notably described by Hartmut Binder as 'a mélange of bug and beetle and — possibly — cockroach' (quoted by Corngold, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Vermin,' p. 61). Likewise, the cultural and historical variability of the animals considered to be vermin surfaces in the charwoman's references to Gregor as a dung beetle, or scarab, a creature sacred to the ancient Egyptians (see Swinford, 'The Portrait of an Armor-Plated Sign,' p. 216).

¹⁰ See Nicholas Holm, 'Consider the Squirrel: Freaks, Vermin, and the Value of Ruin(s) in Nature,' *Cultural Critique*, 80, Winter 2012, pp. 56-95; Colin Jerolmack, 'How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals,' *Social Problems* 55, February 2008, pp. 72-94; and Roman Jakobson, 'Shifters and Verbal Categories' in Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (eds.) *On Language*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 386-392.

¹¹ In this respect, the idea of vermin plays, in the domain of animal life, a role analogous to that of the weed in the domain of plant life.

¹² Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, London: Routledge, 2000.

¹³ Jerolmack, 'How Pigeons Became Rats,' p. 74.

¹⁴ Here it is worth recalling that the anthropologist Mary Douglas defined *dirt* as 'matter out of place,' threatening a 'set of ordered relations' (quoted by Jerolmack, 'How Pigeons Became Rats,' p. 73). Douglas's account resonates with the way, in the third section of Kafka's text, Gregor's bedroom becomes a kind of junk room, and Gregor himself becomes 'covered with dust; fluff and hair and remnants of food trailed with him' (Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in Richard Bausch and R.V. Cassill (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, 7th shorter edition, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006, pp. 386-418; here p. 412).

¹⁵ On the concept of disavowal, i.e. humans' tendency to disavow their own status as one animal species among others, see Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

¹⁶ For a discussion of how ideological factors bear on the migration of characters across species boundaries in fictional narratives, see David Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013, pp. 213-214.

¹⁷ On the distinction between anthropocentric and biocentric understandings of human-nonhuman relationships, see Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985. Tracing the biocentric tradition back to Darwin's denial of any distinction in kind between humans and other animals – to the way Darwin 'places biological man within Nature, giving him an animal genealogy and a mutable mammalian form' while situating 'reason, morality, culture, art, and language within Nature as well' (p. 46) – Norris explores strands of biocentrism in works by Kafka, Nietzsche, D.H. Lawrence, and other late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century writers and artists.

¹⁸ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 413.

¹⁹ Corbeyran & Horne, *La Métamorphose de Franz Kafka*, p. 1.

²⁰ In discussing how Gregor's verminous presence disrupts human attempts to territorialise and thereby dominate larger biotic communities, I foreground concepts of territory developed in work on animal geography, which in Philo and Wilbert's account seeks to 'discern the many ways in which animals are "placed" by human societies in their local material spaces (settlements, fields, farms, factories, and so on), as well as in a host of imaginary, literary, psychological and even virtual spaces' (*Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, p. 5). For a different, schizo-analytic approach, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's account of *The Metamorphosis* and other texts by Kafka featuring nonhuman characters, including 'Investigations of a Dog' [*Forschungen eines Hundes*] (1922) and 'Report to an Academy' [*Ein Bericht für eine Akademie*]

(1917), in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 12-15. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka uses Gregor, the canine narrator of 'Investigations,' the former ape featured in 'Report,' and other nonhuman or hybrid beings to stage a process of becoming-animal, interpreted as a strategy for evading or undermining the repressive psycho-social territorialisation of flows of desire.

²¹ Drawing on de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which describes how ordering systems configure places so as to exclude the possibility of two distinct kinds of things being in the same location at the same time, Philo and Wilbert discuss a range of human classificatory schemes by means of which nonhuman animals are assigned their 'proper place' vis-à-vis humans as well as other nonhuman species (*Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, pp. 6-7). For a discussion of how these same classificatory schemes are coming under pressure from developments in science and technology as well as broader cultural norms and practices, see Frances Bartkowski's *Kissing Cousins: A New Kinship Bestiary*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Bartkowski argues that, in light of new reproductive technologies as well as recent research in the domains of genetic science, anthropology, and primatology, the concepts of family and kinship now need to be remapped – in ways that register how these concepts in fact cut across species boundaries.